

Frequently Asked Questions
State of Wisconsin Broadband Infrastructure Grant Application
(Version 1.0 – August 31, 2009)

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Background

The American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA) includes \$7.2 billion to help build the nation's broadband infrastructure and improve broadband access to consumers and community anchor institutions—like K-12 schools and public libraries. Most of the funding will be awarded via competitive grants administered by the federal Commerce Department's National Telecommunications and Information Administration (NTIA) and the Agriculture Department's Rural Utilities Service (RUS). Applications for the first round of grants closed on August 20. (There will be two more rounds in late 2009 and spring of 2010.) The following FAQ describes the State of Wisconsin's grant application submitted on August 19. This FAQ and the grant's Executive Summary are linked on the DPI's ARRA broadband stimulus website at <http://dpi.wi.gov/pld/arrabbfunding.html>.

Q: Who filed the grant application and what did they file for?

A: The State of Wisconsin, Department of Administration (DOA) filed the grant application as part of the NTIA's Broadband Technology Opportunities Program (BTOP). The application is to bring fiber connectivity to the schools and public libraries in the state that are on the BadgerNet Converged Network (BCN) but still do not have fiber. The grant totals 467 sites in 382 communities across the state with at least one site in every county. Of the 467 sites there are: 74 schools or school districts; 385 public libraries; 8 higher education campuses. The grant totals \$28.7 million with the Department of Administration allocating \$5.7 million of the total to meet the required 20% non-federal funding requirement.

Q: Why did DOA submit this application?

A: For over a year the BCN Advisory Council has encouraged DOA to work with the Wisconsin BadgerNet Access Alliance¹ (WBAA) on exploring options to lower BCN circuit costs. (BadgerNet circuit costs are postalized, which means they are the same statewide.) The Department of Administration and WBAA realize that with postalized rates, BCN circuit costs are not competitive in some areas of the state. The federal ARRA broadband stimulus funding offers a very timely opportunity to address this cost issue and at the same time build a fiber infrastructure to address the longer-term broadband needs of our schools and libraries.

Q: Why is the application only for schools/libraries on BadgerNet?

A: DOA has an existing contract with the WBAA for BadgerNet services and it is within the framework of this contract that DOA has filed its grant application. If your school/library is getting broadband service outside of BadgerNet, DOA has no contractual relationship with whatever company is providing your service and thus it is not in a position to apply for a grant on your behalf. (Note: Schools/libraries can apply for federal broadband funds on their own or as part of a consortium. This first round of applications was difficult because the grant criteria were not targeted at community anchor institutions. The criteria may change in the second and third round of grants. See the question near the end of this FAQ on issues related to the application process.)

¹ The Wisconsin BadgerNet Access Alliance (WBAA) is a consortium of telecommunication carriers who, under contract with DOA, provide broadband connectivity and other services on the BadgerNet Converged Network (BCN).

Q: Because of the short notice, if our school/library could not get board approval to be part of the grant, were we still included?

A: Yes. With the grant guidelines announced in early July and grants due August 14 (later extended to August 20), DOA realized that there was not sufficient time in most localities to get school/library board approval. Therefore, all school districts and libraries that DOA and the WBAA identified as not having fiber were included in the grant. This blanket inclusion was based on the assumption that a great majority of schools/libraries want to participate. Note: If the grant is funded schools and libraries will have an opportunity to withdraw.

Q: I thought the University of Wisconsin or WiscNet was going to be part of this grant application?

A: At least for this first round of federal broadband grants, the State of Wisconsin has gone forward with only this one grant application. More information is at <http://wire.wiscnet.net/2009/08/open-letter-to-the-can-community-regarding-phase-1-of-go-gig/>. Much of the focus of the UW has been on the development of Community Area Networks (CANs). (Comment: DPI believes that both the BCN and CANs provide our schools and libraries with the best opportunities to address their future bandwidth needs.)

Q: What is the chance the DOA application will be funded and when will we know?

A: The broadband grants are highly competitive. The Department of Administration filed under the Broadband Technology Opportunities Program (BTOP). There is \$1.2 billion in BTOP funds available in this first round of grants and approximately 260 applications were submitted requesting \$5.4 billion. Furthermore, \$12.8 billion was requested from the Rural Utilities Service (RUS) and some of these applications will likely also be funded out of the \$1.2 billion in BTOP funds. On the evaluation process, each application will be reviewed by at least three independent reviewers. DOA will know by late September if its application was ranked high enough by the reviewers to be considered for further evaluation. A final decision on all grant applications is expected in November.

Q: If the grant is approved, when will the fiber be installed?

A: Because of winter weather conditions, little outside work will be done until spring 2010. However, many of the telecommunication carriers will be making any required network upgrades over the winter months. Once the weather improves there is an aggressive timeline to install fiber at all of the sites by the end of 2010.

Q: My school/library is on the BCN and already has fiber. Will this grant be of any benefit to me?

A: Yes, assuming it is funded. By having the federal funds pay for installing fiber, the circuit costs under the BadgerNet contract will be reduced substantially. This reduction will then enable the TEACH program to increase its subsidy. The intent is to provide all public libraries on the BCN with 20Mbps for \$100/month and all school districts and library systems with 100Mbps for \$250/month. Because of limited funding the current TEACH policy requires schools/libraries to justify their requests for increased bandwidth. With this grant all libraries and schools will get the 20/100Mbps circuits without needing to justify an increase up to this level.

Q: My school/library is not the BCN and is getting broadband service from another provider. Will this grant be of any benefit to me?

A: Probably not. If you are satisfied with your current provider there is no need to change. If at some future date you want to get a BCN circuit, you can do so at the costs referenced in the previous question. If you previously had a BCN fiber circuit it is likely that the fiber can be reused if your school/library decides to go back to BadgerNet. (Comment: In some states local school districts and libraries are required to purchase from state contracts. In Wisconsin this is a local decision and schools and libraries are free to select the broadband provider that best fits their needs.)

Q: What commitment does my school/library have as part of this grant application?

A: A district will very likely have to make at least a verbal commitment to stay with BadgerNet for a minimum of five more years. Understandably, neither DOA nor the WBAA want to install fiber to a school/library if it will soon leave the network. If a school/library leaves the BCN before the end of five years there will likely be some financial penalty. How much is currently unknown but there will likely be reduced penalties for each year of the commitment. The Department of Administration is reviewing this issue. See also the next two questions on possible issues with Internet costs and routers.

Q: Will the increased bandwidth have any impact on my cost for Internet service?

A: Maybe. Many Internet Service Providers (ISPs) factor in their cost for bandwidth (e.g., transit) which is then included in what they charge a school/library. Check with your ISP on this issue. If you get Internet service from WiscNet there will be no increase in cost because under its Grow Smart initiative WiscNet does not use bandwidth as a factor in its billing.

Q: Will I need to upgrade my school/library's network infrastructure to accommodate the increased bandwidth?

A: This depends on several factors. For example, your current router may have a 100Mbps interface but its processing capacity (throughput) may be considerably less. If the router's throughput is greater than your school/library's peak usage, there is no need to replace it. (If your ISP owns your router contact them concerning any possible router upgrade or replacement and who will pay for it.) Many vendors have been adding routing protocol support, packet shaping/queuing, and QoS to their Ethernet switch products. The grant application includes funds to purchase switches for 260 schools/libraries. It was not feasible in the grant to budget for more costly routers. There may also be other devices in your local network (e.g., firewalls, antivirus scanners, LAN hubs/switches) that will need upgrading to accommodate the bandwidth increase. In summary, to take full advantage of the increased bandwidth some schools/libraries will have to upgrade their network infrastructure and assume the costs for doing so.

Q: What is the role of the Department of Public Instruction (DPI) in this grant application?

A: DPI worked with DOA on completing the narrative sections of the application and it assisted with other parts of the application process too. DPI, in cooperation with CESAs and library systems, is also facilitating communications with the school and library communities on this project.

Q: This first round of grants was not targeted to public sector agencies; will this issue be addressed in the second or third round of grants?

A: This first grant cycle was clearly targeted at applications submitted by telecommunication carriers to bring broadband to residential and business customers. This made it difficult for government or not-for-profit organizations to apply on behalf of community anchor institutions—like K-12 schools, libraries, and local health care facilities. An organization called the Schools, Health, and Libraries Broadband Coalition (SHLB, <http://www.shlbc.org>) has been formed to advocate for changes in the application process for the second and third round of grants. For example, SHLB has already recommended to NTIA that there be a separate category for applications serving community anchor institutions. Over forty organizations are members of SHLB including the American Library Association, EDUCAUSE, the Council of Chief State School Officers and Internet2.

Q: Where can I get more information?

A: Updates will be sent to DPI's K-12 and library email lists and posted to DPI's ARRA broadband stimulus website at <http://dpi.wi.gov/pld/arrabbfunding.html>. You may also contact Bruce Reines, Senior Policy Advisor, Department of Administration, Division of Enterprise Technology, (608-261-6622; bruce.reines@wisconsin.gov). Questions regarding this FAQ should be directed to Bob Bocher, Department of Public Instruction, (608-266-2127; robert.bocher@dpi.wi.gov).